

LOCATION AND ENVIRONMENT

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quantities of ducks and geese, and the inhabitants of the inland villages sometimes made hunting expeditions to the nesting places of wild-fowl in the lakes of the interior uplands. Although numbers of birds were sometimes killed in this way, they were never a steady article of diet. The same is true of grouse. Always plentiful, these birds were commonly killed, but never in large numbers. 223 [136] [262]

The basis of the food supply was fish. The river teemed with salmon, which enabled the country to support its relatively large population. Spring, sockeye, hump-back, dog, and coho salmon, all entered the river in thousands during the spring and summer, while the steel-head could be caught throughout the year. They were taken in weirs and their flesh smoked for winter use. Throughout the year, salmon was the principal article of diet. Second in importance was the olachen, a fish somewhat resembling a herring, which entered the river in great numbers during April or May. They were taken in purse-like nets,* allowed to rot for ten days or two weeks, and then boiled. The grease was skimmed off and kept indefinitely to be used as a relish for other foods. It was always a sign of poverty if a person were obliged to eat berries without olachen grease. Trout and bull-heads were found in the river, but were not sufficiently plentiful to be of importance. 226 262 [251] 2 252 [263] [237] [735] [556]

Although no form of agriculture was practised, the Bella Coola used vegetable food to a considerable extent. Berries were abundant; some were eaten raw, but many more were pounded into a pulpy mass and dried in the sun. Cakes prepared in this way kept indefinitely and formed one of the regular winter foods. The bark of the hemlock and cottonwood was eaten, as well as the roots of many plants. In recent years many of these have not been used, so that an investigator is apt to overlook their great importance in early times. Although useless for food, the cedar was the corner-stone of Bella Coola material culture. From its trunk were split out, with wedges, the wide planks which formed 262 [241] [251] [178] 824 322 ●

*See Appendix A for a description of olachen fishing.

824 their houses. Dishes, benches, cooking-boxes, cradles, totem-
 322 poles, canoes, all were carved from this wood. The bark was
 285 woven into baskets, and when dyed formed the most common
 531 ceremonial decoration.
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Even within the forty miles of the river valley formerly occupied by the Bella Coola there are considerable variations in climate. At the mouth of the river the typical Pacific coast type is found, without great extremes of temperature and with much rain, especially in winter time. During winter, the moisture is precipitated as snow a few hundred feet above the valley, and the limit of the snow can be watched on the mountain slopes, rising or falling a few feet from day to day. Farther up the valley, the winters are colder and in many cases snow lies for weeks on the ground, and in the upper part of the Bella Coola area the winters are severe, although much more moderate than on the upper regions immediately to the east.

173 What has been the history of the inhabitants of this land?

776 They believe that long, long ago, *Alquntām*, the supreme god, caused their first ancestors to be created in his house, *Nusmāt-a*, in the land above, and sent them down to populate the Bella Coola valley. These first people came in groups of two or three, brothers and sisters, or occasionally man and wife, each group descending, in many cases in animal form, to a certain mountain and then making their home at its foot. They brought with them animals and fish, tools and houses, also the knowledge of ceremonial dances. In fact, they differed from the Bella Coola of the recent past only in having greater supernatural power. These first people increased with extraordinary rapidity, until each group grew into a village, bound together by a knowledge of their first ancestor. In course of time the occupants of certain villages combined, as some increased more rapidly than others, but on the whole each settlement maintained its character of being the descendants of one group of the first settlers of this world.

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 [175] This mythological belief is a fair picture of Bella Coola life as it was when the first white man visited the valley. Mac-

1: Mellwraith E-5 (1922-1924) 1948

NE6 Bellacoola NE6

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PLATE 10



Photograph by H. I. Smith, National Museum of Canada

Mask of *Qomogwa* showing his huge hat. Notice the
adze marks on the planks in the background.

[7 186 (B)]

MEDICINE, MAGIC, TABOO

763

"Someone is calling your name."

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If a man stumbles without due cause, it is said:

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"Someone has food ready for you."

When a man partly closes his hand, if a wrinkle-like fold runs straight across the palm it indicates that he is a good carpenter.

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If a mouse nibbles even a single smoked salmon, the whole boxful is thrown away immediately in case dung has been dropped within. It is believed that inadvertent chewing of this is responsible for wearing down the teeth?

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[826]

If a man throws a stone at a pregnant snake, the young ones may rush forth and enter the thrower's stomach. They remain invisible, and no one knows how they enter, but death always results. Snakes are regarded with scorn and aversion, and the only men who dare to handle them are shamans.

[761]

[752]

When a milk tooth is lost, anyone who happens to be present should pick it up, pass it four times around the child's head, sunwise, and throw it away. No explanation of this custom is known.¹⁹

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¹⁹This is not the only custom practised at the loss of a tooth, cf. vol. I, p. 500.

115 Schooner lacked the mental acumen of Joshua and Jim, but
177 he revealed himself as a tribal patriarch, proud of his family's
[153] history and eager to assist his grandchildren and great-grand-
children, but feeling himself lost and helpless in the struggle
before them. With sadness, but without bitterness, he used
to speak of the approaching end of Bella Coola culture, and his
words brought home the tragedy which the spread of civiliza-
tion brings to so many, and the responsibility resting upon the
white people as a whole.

153 Until an intelligence test is devised to correlate the mental
115 ability of the white man with that of the native, it is impos-
sible to compare the two scientifically. None the less, the
writer deliberately expresses the opinion that Joshua Moody
and Jim Pollard are two of the most brilliant men he has met
in any walk of life. They are undoubtedly the most able of
the Bella Coola; others have only slightly less ability, while
the mass of the population compares favourably with an
average white community. Their ability, however, is defi-
nitely conditioned by their conservatism. Absolute trust in the
traditions of their ancestors has checked speculation, as the
established explanation is never questioned; new inventions,
unauthorized by custom, have been regarded as almost sacri-
legious; the force of public opinion, while valuable as a deter-
[624] rent to anti-social practices, has effectively restrained inno-
vations. The Bella Coola are a good example of a community
where development has been atrophied by extreme conser-
vatism fostered by religious beliefs.

105 Taking into account the material obstacles, the achieve-
ments of these people have not been insignificant. In former
• [322] times, provided only with tools of stone and untempered
copper, they built graceful canoes, made watertight boxes,
hewed planks from mighty cedars, and erected large houses
which called for considerable engineering skill. Judged by
[532] white standards, their carving and painting lacked artistic deli-
[535] cacy, but it required no mean ability to portray crest designs to
meet their own standards. Passing from the purely mechanical

177 their earning ability and a man can satisfy his wants by working
182 for a few months each summer. The decline of ceremonials
has left a blank in their lives, too easily filled, alas, with
drinking, idleness, and vice. It is inevitable that the old rites
and old ambitions should pass, but the prohibition of these
before new ones had taken their place, has been disastrous.
The Bella Coola have lost their pride, a calamity as fatal to a
people as to an individual.

They have shown undoubted ability in developing such of
their own talents as fit the needs and requirements of the white
man. Expert carpenters for generations, they have readily
[322] learnt the use of new tools and now build houses and boats of
considerable constructional skill. They have proved them-
[464] selves valuable employees of the canneries which rely to a
large extent upon Indian labour. Under instruction from a
[533] white teacher, a number of the younger men have formed a
band which gives creditable performances with wind and per-
cussion instruments. One can only deplore the fact that the
skill of the Bella Coola in carving, painting, acting, singing,
composing, and story-telling could not have been guided into
channels where it would have developed and added lustre to
the new world in which they find themselves.

The white man's civilization presses forward as an over-
whelming flood, blotting out the cultures of lesser peoples in
all parts of the world. This is inevitable, probably it is well
that it should be so, but it offers little consolation to a tribe
like the Bella Coola. Their life has been destroyed; and,
wonderingly, half-proudly, half-plaintively, the survivors
watch the downfall of all that their ancestors cherished. Too
often the white man fails to understand this; too often he fails
to realize that progress, as he sees it, is wiping out valuable
elements of civilizations other than his own instead of seeking
the good in them and preserving it for the benefit of himself
and the native alike. The Bella Coola culture is dying, and
with it will pass forever something created by a Canadian
people, not great perhaps, but ineffably stamped with their
personality.